DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 650 HE 033 826

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| AUTHOR | McPhail, Irving Pressley |
| TITLE | I've Known Rivers: Reflections on Self-Education and the Cornell Experiment, 1966-1970. |
| PUB DATE | 1999-04-28 |
| NOTE | 22p.; Lecture presented at a meeting of the Cornell Club of Maryland (Baltimore, MD, April 28, 1999). |
| PUB TYPE | Book/Product Reviews (072) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Affirmative Action; Attitude Change; *Black Students; Black Studies; College Admission; *College Students; *Educational Experience; Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; Undergraduate Students |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Cornell University NY |

ABSTRACT

A graduate of Cornell university's class of 1970 reflects on his experiences as a black undergraduate at Cornell from 1966 to 1970, what affirmative action meant to him and his generation of college students, and the self-education black students experienced at Cornell at that time. William Bowen and Derek Bok recently published "The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions," a study of the effects of affirmative action. Bowen and Bok analyzed data on 45,000 students who entered selective colleges in the fall of 1976. Their study indicates that affirmative action policies have helped minority students prepare for many opportunities and that the racially diverse environment provided by affirmative action policies has helped all students prepare to live and work in the increasingly diverse U.S. society. The study also found that, without affirmative admissions, minority enrollment would decline at selective colleges, and that affirmative action policies did not result in the denial of admissions to significant numbers of qualified applicants. The author reflects on what the affirmative action policies at Cornell meant to his own education, and he describes the climate at Cornell in the late 1960s as the first African American students to enter Cornell used a self-education process to make their formal education relevant to the needs of the black community and to lay the foundations of the Black Studies academic movement. (SLD)

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# I've Known Rivers: Reflections on Self-Education and the Cornell Experiment, 1966-1970

## Lecture by:

**Dr. Irving Pressley McPhail**

**Chancellor**

**The Community College of Baltimore County**

**Cornell Class of 1970**

**at**

**Cornell Club of Maryland**

**BWI Marriott Hotel**

**Baltimore, Maryland**

**Wednesday, April 28, 1999**

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# DEDICATION

**To my friend**

**and classmate,**

**Marshall John Garner, M.D.**

**1948 - 1979**

**And**

**To Dr. Gloria I. Joseph**

**A Tribute to Courage**

**A Luta Continua**

**(The Struggle Continues)**

I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Kostis Papadanopolous, Professor of Economics, CCBC/Essex Campus, for encouraging me to reflect on my experiences as an undergraduate student at Cornell University from 1966-1970. The Cornell experience, for me, is one filled with contradiction and ambiguity. On the one hand, this period represented a tremendous degree of introspection and self-education. At the same time, these were difficult times that stretched my resolve to the limit.

The singular moment in my undergraduate career, and the historic event that brings us together this evening, is the occupation of Willard Straight Hall by the Black Liberation Front exactly 30 - years ago. Each decade since April, 1969, America awakens to its fascination with armed Black students taking control of a building on the campus of one of this world's most prestigious institutions of higher learning. Lead articles in Time Magazine and other national establishment media, accompanied by the now classic photograph of Ed Whitfield, Tom Jones, and Eric Evans with rifles and bullets, remind us of the turbulent 1960's and the struggle

for Black Studies at predominantly white universities. Unfortunately, much of the response to this event has been emotional and fixated on the exotic; few scholarly analyses of the factors leading to the takeover of Willard Straight Hall are available.

This evening I shall offer a unique, scholarly perspective on my undergraduate experience at Cornell University from 1966 to 1970 by considering two fundamental issues that establish a context for understanding the events of April, 1969:

1) the evidence in support of affirmative admissions at selective college and universities

AND

2) the process of self-education as a precursor for political and reformist activities, including the struggle for Black Studies.

**The Case for Affirmative Admissions**

Recently, William Bowen and Derek Bok provided the most comprehensive look ever at the positive impact affirmative action has had on college and university admissions. Since its release this fall, The

Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions[1,2], has garnered well deserved praise from both scholarly and business circles for filling the "fact gap" on affirmative admissions. Both proponents and critics alike can agree that the book presents the first scientific and straightforward examination of how students who benefitted from racial preferences have fared, both during and after college. It is elegantly and powerfully argued. And whether you agree or disagree with the conclusions Bowen and Bok draw, you'll find it enlightening and thought-provoking.

Until now, there has only been great emotional outpouring from either the uninformed or those with an agenda on this provocative issue. Whatever side of the issue on which people stand, they stand primarily on principle -- either a commitment to diversity on the one hand, or a defense of individual merit on the other. The result is a heated debate, which often leads to less rather than more understanding when it comes to racial preferences in college and university admissions.

Bowen and Bok are, without doubt, two of the most respected

figures in higher education. Bowen is president of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and former President of Princeton University. Bok is former President of Harvard University, and former Dean of the Harvard Law School. Both Bok and Bowen had been active proponents of affirmative admissions during their tenure at their respective institutions.

Their book, however, represents an honest effort to look at the consequences of what they have long advocated. It provides a calm, expert, analytical study of affirmative admissions that helps readers, whatever side of the issue they are on, come to terms with the principles of fairness vs. the needs of society.

Let's talk about what Bok and Bowen did and what makes their findings so significant. They drew their research from a database, known as "College and Beyond," that was created by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Bok and Bowen are the first to make major use of this unique database. They analyzed data on 45,000 students who entered 28 selective colleges and universities in the fall of 1976 and the

fall of 1989. These colleges provided the Mellon Foundation with information such as SAT scores, admissions decisions and college grades. For the 1989 matriculants only, Bowen and Bok collected survey information on the extent to which they interacted (during college and since college) with individuals of different races, political outlooks, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic origins. Their findings offered two clear reasons to support affirmative admissions to selective schools:

1. Such policies help prepare qualified minority students for many opportunities they have to contribute to a society that is still trying to resolve its racial problems, in a U.S. population that will soon be one-third Black and Hispanic.
2. Such policies provide a racially diverse environment that can help prepare all students to live and work in our increasingly multi-cultural society.

To quote from the book, ". . . race is relevant in determining which candidates 'merit' admission because taking account of race helps

institutions achieve three objectives central to their mission -- identifying individuals with high potential, permitting students to benefit educationally from diversity on campus, and addressing long-term societal needs."

Let's look at some of the key data that brought the authors to these conclusions.

1) About 90 percent of the Black graduates who matriculated in 1976 are involved in one or more civic activities.
2) About 56 percent of the white and Black graduates who matriculated in 1976 went on to get advanced degrees, with Blacks slightly more likely than whites to earn a professional degree in law, medicine or business.
3) The Black graduates from the 1976 cohort have successfully converted "capital" provided by the academically selective schools into highly paying, satisfying careers, and at good wages. As Bowen and Bok point out, these professionals "are the backbone of the emergent Black middle class. . . They can serve as strong

threads in a fabric that binds our own community together and binds those communities into the larger social fabric as well."

4) Even though Blacks accounted for less than 10 percent of the student population, a majority of whites reported that they "knew well" two or more Black students and 84 percent of Black students "knew well" two or more white students. A large majority of all matriculants thought their colleges should, in fact, maintain or increase the emphasis on diversity.

On the flip side, Bowen and Bok also looked at the possible effects of discontinuing such affirmative action policies. Of the 700 Black students in the 1976 cohort who probably would have been rejected without affirmative action: 205 went on to obtain professional degrees or doctorates, 70 became doctors, 60 became lawyers, 125 became business executives, more than 300 are leaders of civic activities, they earned an average of $71,000 annually, and 65 percent were very satisfied with their undergraduate experience. Without affirmative admissions, Bok and Bowen project that minority enrollment at the five

colleges in the study for which complete statistics were available would plunge "to early 1960s levels." According to the authors, eliminating racial preferences would undercut positive gains. As support, they cite current data from California and Texas, where public institutions can no longer take race into account as a consequence of the 1996 overturning of the 1978 U.S. Supreme Court "Bakke" decision.

Their findings also rebut several allegations made by critics of affirmative admissions:

1. The data do not support the argument that a significant number of white applicants have been denied admissions because of such policies: According to Bok and Bowen's research, race-blind admissions would only increase the probability of admission for whites from 25 percent to 26.5 percent.
2. The data do not support the notion that Blacks with lower scores than their classmates at the most selective schools would fit in better at less selective schools.
3. And finally, the data do not support critics who suggest that Blacks

who benefit from such policies, in turn, feel stigmatized by them. As Bowen states, "It's time to abandon the notion that minority students recruited by these schools have somehow been victimized."

Bowen and Bok's data methodically support the view that affirmative action in selective schools is working and should continue. I will contend, however, that this study has its limitations, as all studies do. First, it is overwhelmingly quantitative. While this is beneficial in providing much needed empirical data, this approach does not bring into focus the wealth of qualitative data that could shed further light on this issue. Second, the study was limited to Black and white students. This fails to consider the significant number of Hispanic and Asian-American minorities entering the selective institutions included in the study. And third, because the study was limited to selective liberal arts colleges and research universities, it can not detail the impact of affirmative admissions on students attending public colleges and universities.

I do not believe, however, that any of these limitations weaken the strength of the conclusions Bowen and Bok have drawn. Nor do they

negate the legitimacy of their findings. Rather, they demonstrate that race-conscious admissions as practiced by this significant segment of higher education has worked. Let us use this ground breaking research as the stepping stone to study the impact of affirmative admissions at public colleges and universities, including community colleges. Similar research on the contribution of "open admissions" community colleges to the development of the Black middle class and to upward economic mobility for other students of color is also needed.

I am ecstatic that we finally have a sound body of evidence to help advance this passionate debate over race-conscious admissions to a calm, clear and positive resolution. Bowen and Bok's work deserves to play an influential role in the national dialogue and future litigation over race-based admissions. As Randall Kennedy of the Harvard Law School has said, "*The Shape of the River* should be essential reading for anyone seeking a dependable guide through the morass of competing claims that obscure from public attention the questions that need to be posed and the answers that need to be assessed."

Let me conclude this section with the metaphor from Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi that Bowen and Bok used as the inspiration for the title of their book.

> **You've got to know the shape of the river perfectly. It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night...**
> **Do you mean to say that I've got to know all the million trifling variations of shape in the banks of this interminable river as well as I know the shape of the front hall at home?**
> **On my honor, you've got to know them better.**

Bowen and Bok argue that wherever each of us stands in the debate over the wisdom of affirmative admissions, we will only make informed contributions when we have learned "the shape of the entire river."

## Self Education: The Transformation of Experience

Let us now backtrack to the fall of 1966, a full decade before the fall 1976 cohort group in the Bowen and Bok study. Let me state my conclusion first: the African American students who entered Cornell in

the fall of 1966 employed a self-education process grounded in the Black experience to make our formal education relevant to the needs of the Black community, and to lay the foundation of a revolutionary academic movement: Black Studies.

**The Vanguard Group**

Most of us in the freshman class of 1966 resided in the ghetto. We came from families that struggled to survive. Most of us received our secondary school education in ghetto schools; a few had received scholarships to prep schools or had attended competitive public high schools like my alma mater, Stuyvesant High School, in lower Manhattan. Most of us entered Cornell because of the greater mobility we believed we might have within the predominantly white society.

Unbeknownst to most of us at the time, we were actually subjects in a grand experimental design. Cleveland Donald, Jr. has argued:[3]

> The point should be emphasized: the university is a laboratory where an experiment in black-white relations is

being performed to bring about greater social control of the black community, or at least a particular segment of that community. Given ideal conditions, and if it were possible to isolate the university as some academics claim, the experiment would have been carried out with predictability and according to plan. But, like the impact of the African Independence Movement on the Afro-American experience, the rise of black nationalism within the black community intruded into the Cornell laboratory.

**Black Power: The Emergence of a New Paradigm**

The concept of Black Power echoed by the late Kwame Touré (Stokely Carmichael) in 1966 galvanized the Black community. It was a call for Black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It was a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society

Touré (Carmichael) and Hamilton (1967) defined the fundamental premise on which the concept of Black Power rests:[4]

> Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks. By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society. Traditionally, each new ethnic group in this society has found the route to social and political viability through the organization of its own institutions with which to represent its needs within the larger society.

The emergence of Black Power and later, Black Nationalism and Pan Africanism, served as a catalyst for us to reexamine our motives and to question the relevance of our formal education in the arts and humanities, social and behavioral sciences, and basic sciences and technology to the struggles of our people back home in the ghettos.

Williams and Ladd have defined self-education as:[5]

> The acquisition, by one's own initiative, of a certain body of knowledge or expertise conducive not only to the employment of man, but also to the employment of self. Self-

education does not, of course, preclude the formal educative process, but may not be enhanced by it beyond the obvious necessity of mastering certain basic skills.

For the Black freshman class of 1966, race became the major organizing principle of our lives, our learning began to take on meaning relative to Black experience, self-education began largely through reading African and African-American History and Culture and sharing the results of our enlightenment, and knowledge began to take on goal-directed meaning; that is, it had utility in the context of personal experience and race.

Out of the crucible of self-education emerged the struggle for Black Studies. We envisioned an intellectually challenging program of coursework, research, and community development activities, led by distinguished Black scholars and practitioners, that we expected Cornell to recruit, with our advice and consent. Today, such academic pursuits led by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. at Harvard and Manning Marable at Columbia, for example, are considered progressive intellectual responses

of elite white research universities to the imperative of diversity and multiculturalism. But in 1969, the thought of a Black think tank of the magnitude we envisioned was untenable and ran counter to the aims of the Cornell experiment.

The growing frustrations we experienced while living in a university environment that was hostile to our cultural needs, the resistance to Black Studies, and in April 1969, the burning of a cross in front of Wari House, a cooperative campus residence for African-American coeds, ignited the Black campus community and led to the siege of Willard Straight Hall. And the rest is history.

## I've Known Rivers

A lot has happened in 30-years. James Turner has built a renowned Center for Africana Studies and Research. I am hopeful that the campus climate and support for diversity has improved. I am, further, encouraged by the data on civic participation in the Bowen and Bok study which demonstrates that an ever-larger cadre of Black men and women from selective colleges and universities are providing the kind of

leadership that DuBois envisioned in his call for the "Talented Tenth." Black members of both the 1976 and 1989 entering cohorts (and especially those with advanced professional degrees) are giving back and maintaining ties to their communities, while also forging links with the broader American society.

I believe very strongly that the struggles and successes of the Black freshman class of 1966 laid the groundwork for the successes of the Black freshman classes of 1976 and 1989 and beyond. The struggle for Black Studies and the Willard Straight Hall event were necessary and inevitable events in the process of self-education that transformed our lives and, hopefully, humanized Cornell at the same time.

Bowen and Bok referred to the metaphor of Mark Twain's Mississippi. To my classmates in the Black freshman class of 1966, I dedicate the metaphor of Langston Hughes' Mississippi:

**I've known Rivers:**

**I've known rivers ancient as the world**

**and older than the flow of human**

**blood in human veins.**

**My soul has grown deep like the rivers.**

**I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.**

**I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.**

**I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.**

**I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln**

**went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its**

**muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.**

**I've known rivers:**

**Ancient, dusky rivers.**

**My Soul has grown deep like the rivers.**

-- Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

PEACE AND HEALTH

# ENDNOTES

1. William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

2. See Clifford Adelman, "The Rest of the River," University Business, January/February 1999: 42 - 48 for a provocative discussion and alternative perspective on the significance of race and education.

3. Cleveland Donald, Jr., "Black Students," in Peter I. Rose, Stanley Rothman, and William J. Wilson, eds., Through Different Eyes: Black and White Perspectives on American Race Relations. (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) 379.

4. Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Touré) and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 44.

5. Joyce E. Williams and Ron Ladd, "On the Relevance of Education for Black Liberation," The Journal of Negro Education 47 (1978): 275.